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Plans for CIA Surveillance

The Central Intelligence Agency always has averted meaningful scrutiny by Congress under the central argument that the CIA's effectiveness as a highly secret undertaking would be crippled if Congress were to ask embarrassing questions.

This argument has come up against others which, in our judgment, are more than its match. The CIA is being called increasingly into question for its evident dabbling in foreign policy. Some of its clandestine operations are demonstrably not for the purpose of gathering intelligence, and sometimes they constitute interference in the internal affairs of other nations.

This imperils the national interest of the United States. The fact that little is known about CIA operations, so that observers are forced into the tricky waters of conjecture, is in itself dangerous. Secret or not, the CIA should in reasonable measure be subject to the same rule that applies to all foreign agencies: It is the public's business, and the public has a right to know what it is up to.

Against this background one must consider two current attempts, by Senators Stephen M. Young and Eugene J. McCarthy, to assert the congressional right of surveillance over the CIA as over other agencies. Senator McCarthy would clear the air with a "full and complete study," by a Foreign Relations subcommittee of how the CIA affects foreign relations. Mr. Young wants Congress to set up a permanent joint Senate-House committee to keep an eye on the intelligence agency.

Both proposals have merit, and the first might indeed provide valuable guidelines for operation of a committee. Discreetly handled, surveillance by such a committee would not hurt the CIA and might keep it from getting out of control.